



**SPECIAL SECTION:
SCHOOL
COUNSELORS
AND
PRINCIPALS**

Exploring the dynamics of an evolving relationship



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Tommy Welch

With the increased emphasis on social-emotional learning, preventive services, and counseling geared toward classroom instruction, the role of the school counselor is changing. But how does that impact secondary school principals? To explore this issue, we convened a roundtable in September moderated by *Principal Leadership* Senior Editor Michael Levin-Epstein and consisting of experts in this area, including: Jill Cook, assistant director of the American School Counselor Association in Alexandria, VA; Emily Goodman-Scott, assistant professor in school counseling at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA; Elizabeth Parker, president of the Virginia School Counselor Association and coordinator of school counseling programs for Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools in Williamsburg, VA; and Tommy Welch, principal of Meadowcreek High School in the Gwinnett County Public Schools in Norcross, GA, who was named the 2018 Georgia High School Principal of the Year by the Georgia Association of Secondary School Principals and was a finalist for NASSP's National Principal of the Year.

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Levin-Epstein: What are your thoughts about the overall relationship between school counselors and principals today?

Welch: Overall, principals understand the value-added contributions of a comprehensive counseling plan and a certified school counselor. Although I believe the role of the principal and counselor has changed over the years, it is still value-added and productive, but much different. I believe the principal-counselor relationship has changed in response to changing accountability measures along funding formulas that do not directly support the true work of a school comprehensive plan.

Accountability measures have increased awareness and frequency of standardized assessment, which has led to more K–12 principals including counselors as a portion of their school improvement teams to provide social-emotional readiness tools to ensure all students are ready and focused on learning. The focus on protecting instructional time has contributed to some decreasing classroom lessons focused on decision-making and [using] appropriate coping mechanisms to handle stress or peer conflicts. Recent tragic events across the nation have initiated a sense of urgency to return to our school counseling roots to provide preventive measures to assist in identifying and supporting all students in need prior to a major outburst.

Cook: I think the relationship has changed over the last two decades, and I think one of the primary reasons for that is there's really been a shift in the work that school counselors provide in school settings. The profession has shifted from being ancillary and reactive to one that addresses the academic, career, and social-emotional development of all students in a school through a comprehensive school counseling program. In 2003, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) released the *ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* that outlines what that comprehensive program should look like.

One of the components is a principal-school counselor agreement, which is a written document that should be completed at the start of each school year and helps guide and frame the conversation between the principal and school counselor (or school counseling team) about the school counseling program goals, how school counselors will work toward spending 80 percent of their time in direct and indirect service to students, and what professional development activities they will attend. This agreement and the conversations that take place because of it have really helped principals understand what school counselors do—and should be doing—and how they can support the goals and needs of the school so students can be successful.

Parker: We have definitely made a lot of progress in the area of principal-school counselor relationships, but we still have some work to do, specifically at the secondary level. I have the opportunity to work with school counselors at all three levels—elementary, middle, and high school—and I find that often the education, training, and role of the school counselor can be misunderstood or not properly recognized. As a result, school counselors are often assigned a number of administrative duties, such as scheduling, monitoring duties, test coordination, substitute teaching, providing classroom coverage, and data entry that remove counselors from providing direct, face-to-face counseling services to students. This makes it incredibly challenging for students to receive the social-emotional, mental, and behavioral health services they need.

This also limits student access to academic and career development initiatives and opportunities for individual student planning with a school counselor. ASCA's principal-school counselor agreement is a wonderful way to address this challenge, as it can support principals and school counselors in the planning and implementation of a comprehensive program that ensures 80 percent of a school counselor's time is spent in the delivery of eight specific direct and indirect counseling services to students.

Goodman-Scott: I'd like to add to that list 504 [plan] coordination. That's something that I've seen a real rise recently in terms of inappropriate school counseling activities that school counselors are often asked to do that take them away from directly serving the students. This is such an important topic; I'm glad we're talking about this. Thank you, Michael, and to your organization for asking us here and for prioritizing this. In terms of the collaboration between school administrators and school counselors, I've seen that collaboration on two levels, both the pre-service level and the practicing level, and I'll speak to my experiences as a practicing school counselor as well as a faculty member.

On the pre-service level, I've heard and I've seen and done some really powerful collaborative efforts between school counselors and administrators when they're in their graduate programs, helping them start collaborating and understanding their roles at the pre-service level. Things like a school counseling faculty member collaborating with leadership faculty, getting our students together and doing some activities and education, such as implementing a comprehensive school counseling program such as the ASCA National Model. Often, we hear administrators share, "We had no idea school counselors had a national set of standards and state-level standards or ethical codes, or that they use

data—schoolwide data, student-level data—and that drives their programs, or even that we have school counseling programs." So, there's a lot of great advocacy and education that happens at the pre-service level.

Also, as they're practicing, I love the principal-school counselor agreement. That worked very well for me as a practicing school counselor, sitting down with my administrators at the beginning of the school year and mapping out:

"This is my school counseling role, this is what I'm doing; here are the resources I need; here's the time." Checking in with the administrators to ask, "What are your priorities for the school year? What are the school leadership and school improvement committees' priorities for the year? And how can our school counseling program meet them?" Because, as we know, the school counseling program should really be embedded into the other goals and initiatives the school has going on. That's one way to help, that the school counseling program is braided within the greater school initiatives.

What I also appreciated as a practicing school counselor is I had a standing meeting with my administrators every Monday morning, and every Monday morning we would sit down and check in on activities from the week before and look at the week ahead. That helped keep us in close communication—as well as communicating throughout the week—but that was a

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great strategy, the agreement at the beginning of the year, and then having a weekly check-in to keep the school counseling department and the team of administrators on the same page.

Welch: It appears that some of the cause of the concerns above [is] the misalignment of systemic programs such as evaluations, accountability, and leadership preparation. Administrators are typically former teachers who were trained by colleges and universities to be instructional leaders within their building. Very rarely, if [ever], is there a course on counseling or access to the ASCA model. Any knowledge of the comprehensive counseling program is typically the responsibility of the district or on-the-job training. To assist with this gap in alignment, it is left up to the building leader to educate his/her team on the counselors' preparation skills and objectives as they are aligned with the key performance indicators within

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the local school plan. Based upon the number of schools in the nation, the variability of implementation can differ dramatically. I recommend using the ASCA model to reduce the variability of implementation for any principal. The challenge is that principals are not held accountable for effective implementation of the ASCA model. Principals and schools are measured by key performance indicators—the ASCA model is not one, but it does overlap with several variables—but the school leader would have to know the ASCA model to make the connections with state accountability.

Open Communication

Levin-Epstein: How frequent is the dialogue between counselors and secondary school principals?

Welch: I think that really depends on the leadership style of the principal. Overall, it appears as though most counseling departments are treated as

a department within a school. The best model I have seen is one that includes the counselors as a portion of the leadership team. Even that model is not perfect, as some believe they are being treated as admin and not counselors. I currently meet with my counselors once a week. The frequent communication, although not required by the ASCA model, is something that helps with the understanding of roles and current student initiatives.

Frequently, teachers provide insight on student and/or staff members that informs our schoolwide decisions; without counselors at the table, the admin team may have unintentionally made a decision that counters the efforts of our counselors. Our counselors also provide what I like to call “qualitative formative assessment” data on the culture and climate of the school. Simply put, they have and understand the pulse of the school. This information is vital when implementing a new initiative.

Parker: I agree that this depends on the leadership style of the principal, as well as the principal’s previous experience with school counselors and understanding of how the school counselor can directly support the school’s mission, strategic goals, and overall school improvement plan. In my experience, a school district’s adoption of a school counselor-specific evaluation tool—which often includes

an observation component specific to school counselors—leads to an increase in the frequency of dialogue between secondary principals and school counseling departments and often results in increasing the productiveness of this communication.

From a state perspective, we are seeing large pockets of this happening in specific regions, which results in a strong collaborative relationship between the two parties. In other regions, we are still seeing instances where school counselors are viewed as guidance or vocational counselors and are continuing to be assigned a number of noncounseling activities that do not capitalize on their education, training, or skill set; this makes it challenging for them to implement the ASCA national model with fidelity. This is an area of focus for the Virginia School Counselor Association as we look at how we can best support school counselors throughout every region in the Commonwealth.

Cook: Nationally, we do see what Liz sees in her district. It varies widely based on the personnel involved and the actual institution or the school. Again, if they’re implementing the ASCA national model, they should, at least once a year, have a formal conversation with the principal to discuss the role and how the school counseling program can support the school’s goals and address achievement, opportunity,

and equity gaps. We know that some principals didn't receive training in their pre-service program about the role of the school counselor or perhaps have an antiquated vision of what school counselors or the guidance counselors of old used to do. It really provides an opportunity for school counselors to discuss what their role is in a school and to be able to show the results and impact of the program through data.

For some school counselors—and it's something we have conversations about and are still working on—it's having school counselors step up to that plate and take on those leadership roles and take on reaching out to the principals and saying, "It's important that we have these conversations." We know running a school is a massive undertaking and that principals have a lot going on, but it's really important for school counselors to understand they need to take that initiative to ask to have the time with the principal.

Parker: Absolutely. I believe that when school counselors take that initiative, and principals are open and willing to contribute to the relationship as well, we have a successful and strong collaboration that directly results in positive impacts on student achievement, attendance, and behavior.

Goodman-Scott: Dovetailing on some of those points, I worked fabulously with my school administrator. Particularly, we

did school counseling conferences, but also administrative conferences about how we could collaborate together and what were the benefits, how we were able to do that. [It's helpful] just going in and having those conversations as a school counselor, helping to educate administrators as to what the role of the school counselor is and provide some advocacy. They may have an outdated perception of what school counselors are supposed to be doing and the skills that we have, and say, "I had no idea my school counselors were versed in looking at data to determine gaps and how to close those gaps." There are things they weren't aware of.

Also, as a practicing school counselor, I had the experience of my administrator coming to me and saying, "I'd like you to be in charge of testing as a school counselor," and some other nonschool counseling activities. I was able to track my activities of what I was doing for a week—the group counseling, the individual counseling, the consultation with family members and teachers, the calls to child protective services, the advising, those pieces—and then to show over the course of the week: "This is how I'm spending my time. If I need to step out of that role and be a testing coordinator, these are all the things that would be lost. As an administrator, what would you prefer for our school?" Realizing, when he looked at how I was spending my time, he said, "I had no idea what school counselors do. You

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can't stop these invaluable activities for our school." As a result of that conversation and some of that process data that I collected, he was able to shift around the testing coordination responsibility to someone else.

So, although I did assist during that couple-week window of testing, I was not the overall coordinator. It helped me by having that conversation about what a school counselor is supposed to be doing and how that impacts students in the greater school community. While comprehensive school counseling has been around for several decades, our most recent national model was created 15 years ago. But some school counselors were prepared under a different paradigm and need retraining to be brought up to speed. It's important for administrators to be aware of that shift

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that’s been happening over the past 15 years.

Levin-Epstein: Can you provide us with specific roles that school counselors play that benefit principals that not everyone may be aware of?

Cook: I’ll start us off. One of the things that the model requires is that every year, school counselors should review the school’s data to see where the gaps and needs are and create school counseling program goals based around those school and student needs. Then, school counselors address the goals through classroom guidance, core curriculum, small groups, and individual student planning. There are different ways and avenues through which those goals can be addressed. All along the way, school counselors are collecting data, looking at impact, looking at effectiveness, what needs to be tweaked next time. It’s not just “random

acts of guidance.” They’re not just going around giving hugs and hankies; they’re actively looking at those data points that are important to the school. That is one of the things that I think is often a big surprise, that they are doing work to help the schools and help students be successful.

Parker: Speaking specifically to what those services look like, I like to share with principals that school counselors are trained to deliver eight different types of counseling services to students, and that these services should take up 80 percent of their time. These include the delivery of core counseling curriculum—which refers to preventative, evidence-based classroom lessons and large group activities—as well as individual counseling, small-group counseling, individual student planning, and crisis-response services for students that need additional, targeted support. These direct counseling services should consume the majority of this 80 percent, while consultation, collaboration, and referrals are indirect services that should make up the rest.

As Jill said, there should be no random acts of counseling. There is an expectation today that school counselors are diving deep into the school’s data to identify needs and gaps in the areas of achievement, attendance, and behavior and then building a comprehensive program around goals that address those needs and gaps directly.

Additionally, they are using counseling strategies, techniques, and interventions that are based on evidence and grounded in theory.

There is also the expectation that counselors are collecting, examining, and sharing their own data, not only to show how students are different as a result of their school counseling program, but also to inform future practice. I would like to point out that comprehensive school counseling programs today include a focus on prevention that was not typically present in guidance counseling services of the past, and this is a distinction that many do not know about. School counselors are unique in that the eight different types of school counseling services described earlier span all three levels of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

Goodman-Scott: That’s a great point. I was thinking that same word, Liz: “prevention.” That’s what makes school counselors unique. I know we have other school staff who also provide some similar services. We have school counselors, psychologists, and social workers. What makes school counselors unique is that we do offer prevention services for the entire school community—schoolwide services as well as classroom-based lessons. In order to fulfill those roles—such as prevention for all students, and then time-bound individual and group counseling for students with elevated needs, amongst

other roles—in order to be able to do those, we need to have the appropriate ratio, and that’s been a hot topic nationally as well as at the state level. It’s having that recommended ratio of one school counselor for every 250 students.

Strategies for Prevention

Levin-Epstein: Could you give us a specific example of an innovative prevention service that school counselors can provide?

Welch: Something that our counselors do a lot of work with is bringing the services in the building, so they provide the services space so that our students who don’t have the access to go out can receive them while they’re at school. Those wraparound services, our counselors work very hard at ensuring that they’re available in the building for our students. So, things like mental care, they make sure there’s a counselor that comes in three times a week and provides service for the students. Things such as preventative health care, they make sure that the person that they would actually refer the student or the family to is available in the building for the students. That’s been an added value for our students for their mental and their physical health, keeping them engaged in school.

Parker: Right now, a lot of prevention work is focused on trauma-informed practices, building more positive

school climates as well as addressing the psychosocial school environment, which research shows directly impacts school safety. Specifically, we are seeing prevention efforts targeting conflict resolution and problem-solving, bullying prevention, self-regulation, frustration tolerance, suicide prevention, and strengths-based work that is helping students build coping skills as well as strengthen the noncognitive factors we know directly impact student achievement.

This prevention work positively impacts all students, but can significantly impact the lives of students who have become disengaged or disenfranchised with school. Schools can be the ideal place to provide these supports, and school counselors know students, parents, and other staff, which contributes to the accessibility of services. However, I do want to note that all services provided in schools should be appropriate to the learning environment, and those that are not can be ineffective or even counterproductive. Being trained to work within the school culture is essential to being effective, and school counselors are specifically trained to provide counseling services within the learning context.

Goodman-Scott: I agree with the different interventions and programs that Liz mentioned. There are a number of resources to find evidence-based practices, such as the What Works

Clearinghouse and the Center for School Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation out of the University of Amherst. So, there are a number of evidence-based practices that should be implemented so that we’re not just choosing interventions and practices at random.

Also, something that is very big right now—and it’s been big for a while; it’s data-driven and an evidence-based practice—is the use of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), also known as Multi-Tiered System of Supports. So, we see that school counselors are one member of the team that helps—not the sole [member], and [the school counselor] may or may not be the lead—but certainly a member of the team. Again, we’ve seen some data-driven strategies for prevention, expectations for all students and the use of data to look at students who have elevated needs and how to best address those student and school needs, again through a range of evidence-based practices that are built into that framework. That’s something that’s implemented in about 26,000 schools throughout the country, and that number is constantly growing. There’s a lot of federal grant funding regarding that initiative. Also, it aligns very nicely with running a comprehensive school counseling program as school counselors. 